

**IMAGE SENSOR WITH STABILIZED BLACK LEVEL
AND LOW POWER CONSUMPTION**

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to an image sensor, more particularly, to an image sensor having plurality of pixels arranged in rows and columns, for use in such an electronic camera, an image reader or a facsimile, with a stabilized black level and low power consumption.

2. Description of the Related Art

In an image sensor, each light receiving element outputs a signal having an integrated light component and an integrated dark current component. This dark current has a strong temperature dependency that the current becomes about twice with rise of 9° C.

In order to remove the integrated dark current component from the signal to obtain true integrated light signal, in the prior art, the peripheral region of a pixel array was covered with a light shielding film to form an optical black pixel region, and an integrated dark current signal was read out from the optical black pixels in a blanking period to obtain the average voltage V_d of the integrated dark current signals in a black clamp circuit as an offset value (a black clamp level). The average V_d was

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subtracted from each pixel signal V_s in the black clamp circuit in a period of reading out from an effective pixel region.

There are two kind of black clamps, one is a line black clamp performed in each horizontal scanning, the other is a frame black clamp performed in each frame, and one of them is adopted.

FIG. 19 shows an integrated dark current signal read out from an optical black pixel region in a horizontal blanking period. The signal is not constant according to characteristics of each pixel.

Especially, when a defective pixel exists, an integrated dark current signal suddenly changes as shown in FIG. 19, therefore an offset value becomes incorrect in a black clamp circuit having a integration capacitor for obtaining an average value, which causes lateral stripe noise. If the width of the optical black pixel region is wide in order to prevent the noise, the offset component could not be obtained in a horizontal blanking period in an image sensor having quite many pixels, or a chip area increases with the result of higher cost.

On the other hand, in an image sensor adopted in portable equipment, reduction in power consumption has been required.

There are following methods for reduction in power

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consumption of a semiconductor chip:

(1) to stop an operation clock in a period where no operation is required; and

(2) to reduce a clock frequency by a divider, for example, to a half, a quarter and one-eighths thereof.

However, the chip of an image sensor includes an analogue circuit and a digital circuit, power consumption of the analog circuit is larger than that of the digital circuit with a large ratio, and power consumption of an image sensor for taking a moving picture cannot decrease to a great extent by such methods.

When a power source for the analog circuit is on/off controlled, the influence of off appears after one frame, therefore the power source cannot be simply turned off.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Accordingly, it is an object of the present invention to provide an image sensor capable of preventing variations in black level due to a pixel defect.

It is another object of the present invention to provide an image sensor capable of obtaining a black clamp level in a shorter time.

It is still another object of the present invention to provide an image sensor capable of decreasing power consumption by performing fine on/off control of a power

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Further, since an integrated dark current signal has to be sampled at a specific time, a configuration of a clamp circuit can be made simpler than that in the art.

Furthermore, since a black clamp level (an offset value) can be obtained in a shorter time than in the prior art because of the above described reason, there is no problem even if quite many pixels exist in a pixel array and thereby a blanking period is short.

In another aspect of the present invention, there is provided an image sensor comprising a control circuit for

With this aspect, power supply for the read-out circuit ceases in the light integration period and besides, power supply to the pixel array and the read-out circuit ceases in the power-off period, thereby power consumption in the image sensor can be reduced.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION IN THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 2 is a circuit diagram of part of the pixel array of FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is a graph showing an integrated dark current

signal (voltage) read out from an optical black pixel region in a horizontal blanking period;

FIG. 4 is a schematic block diagram showing an image sensor of a second embodiment according to the present invention;

FIG. 5 is a schematic block diagram showing an image sensor of a third embodiment according to the present invention;

FIG. 6 is a schematic block diagram showing an image sensor of a fourth embodiment according to the present invention;

FIG. 7 is a circuit diagram showing the potential averaging line 30A of FIG. 6 and part of its peripheral circuitry;

FIG. 8 is a schematic block diagram showing an image sensor of a fifth embodiment according to the present invention;

FIG. 9 is a circuit diagram showing the potential averaging lines 30A to 30D of FIG. 8 and part of their peripheral circuitry;

FIG. 10 is a schematic block diagram showing an image sensor of a sixth embodiment according to the present invention;

FIG. 11 is a schematic block diagram showing an image sensor of a seventh embodiment according to the present

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FIG. 12 is a time chart showing operation of the power source control circuit of FIG. 11;

FIG. 14 is a time chart showing operation of the power source control circuit of FIG. 13;

FIG. 16 is a time chart showing operation of the power source control circuit of FIG. 15;

FIG. 18 is a time chart showing operation of the power source control circuit of FIG. 16; and

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Referring now to the drawings, wherein like reference characters designate like or corresponding parts throughout

First Embodiment

The image sensor is, for example, of a MOS type.

In the horizontal scanning start side of the optical black pixel region 101 and beneath the light shielding film, potential averaging lines 30 drawn with thick lines in FIG. 1 are formed along pixel rows.

Pixels of the optical black pixel region 101 are the same as those of the effective pixel region 102 only with the exception that the light shielding film is formed above

The control inputs of the read-out switch elements on the same row are commonly connected to a row select line 50 which is a gate line, and the control inputs of the reset switch elements 41 to 45 are commonly connected to a row reset line 51 which is a gate line. To the row select line 50 and the row reset line 51, a row select signal RS1 and a reset signal RST1, respectively, are provided from a

vertical scanning circuit 11 of FIG. 1. The reset ends (cathodes) of the photodiodes of the optical black pixels 1021 to 1023 are commonly connected to the potential averaging line 30 drawn with a thick line.

A read-out switch element 33 is turned on by a pulse of the row select signal RS1 and thereby the cathode potential of the photodiode 31 is read out through the buffer amplifier 32 and the read-out switch element 33 onto the vertical bus line 121. Similarly, in regard to the pixels 1022 to 1025, the cathode potentials of the photodiodes are read out through buffer amplifiers and read-out switch elements onto the vertical bus lines 122 to 126, respectively. Then, the reset switches 41 to 45 are turned on by a pulse of the reset signal RST1 and the cathode potentials of the photodiodes are reset to VDD.

Operations for read out and resetting on the pixels 1021 to 1025 are performed every frame period. In one frame period from a reset to the next reset, electric charges accumulated in the photodiodes of the effective pixels 1024 and 1025 are discharged by incident light and dark current, while the electric charges in the optical black pixels 1021 to 1023 are discharged only by dark current.

Referring back to FIG. 1, the vertical scanning circuit 11 including a shift register sequentially activates row select lines on the pixel array 10. Thereby, signals

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The sample and hold circuits 14 are, for example, correlation double sampling circuits (CDS) and in this case, read out and holding of each integrated signal will be detailed as follows. Firstly, the sample and hold circuits 14 are reset. Then a voltage (an integrated signal V_x) + (a component DV depending on variation of characteristic of the buffer amplifier 32 and the read-out switch element 33 coupled to the photodiode 31) is sampled to corresponding one of the sample and hold circuits 14. Next the resetting is performed at the pixel on the selected row. Thereafter, a second sampling is performed to hold the difference $V_x = (V_x + DV) - DV$ in the corresponding one of the sample and hold circuits 14.

The horizontal scanning circuit 15 including a shift register sequentially activates the sample and hold circuits 14 from left to right in FIG. 1 to read out signals therefrom onto a horizontal bus 16. The signal on the horizontal bus 16 is amplified by the amplifier circuit 17.

The integrated dark current signal are read out onto the horizontal bus 16 during each horizontal blanking period and the voltage thereof is constant as shown in FIG. 3. That is, since the voltage has been averaged prior to read out by the potential averaging line 30, no averaging in the black clamp circuit 18 is required. The black clamp circuit 18 samples the voltage, for example, at a time t_1 of FIG. 3 and holds the sampled voltage as a black clamp level V_b . When reading out an integrated signal from an effective pixel, the black clamp circuit 18 subtracts the black clamp voltage V_b from the integrated voltage signal V_s on the horizontal bus 16. Such a black level correcting operation is performed on each horizontal line and called as line black clamp.

The black level corrected signal is converted to a digital value by an A/D converter circuit 19.

A timing control circuit 20 generates control signals for operating the vertical scanning circuit 11, the sample and hold circuit 13 and the horizontal scanning circuit 15 based on a clock signal CLK.

Referring back to FIG. 2, in the optical black pixels 1021 to 1023, since the reset ends of the photodiodes are commonly connected to the potential averaging line 30, the integrated dark current signals read out from the vertical bus lines 121 to 123 are almost equal to one another.

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In the first embodiment, since a reset node in each pixel on the same row in the optical black pixel region 101 is commonly connected to the potential averaging line 30, a potential averaging process is automatically performed prior to signal read out from the optical black pixel region 101 instead of an averaging process performed in the black clamp circuit 18 in the prior art, thereby stabilizing a read-out signal level. Hence, more correct line black clamp is realized, thereby reducing lateral stripe noise to improve image quality.

Second Embodiment

In this image sensor, among the vertical bus lines in

the optical black pixel region 101, only the vertical line 123 of FIG. 2 is connected to the signal input of one of sample and hold circuits 14A.

Thereby, even when the number of pixels in the pixel array 10 is quite large and in turn the horizontal blanking period is short, the black clamp level can be correctly sampled by the black clamp circuit 18 in this short period.

Further, the number of the sample and hold circuits 14A and stages of a horizontal scanning circuits 15A can be smaller than that in the case of FIG. 1.

The other points are the same as that of the first embodiment.

Third Embodiment

FIG. 5 is a schematic block diagram showing an image sensor of a third embodiment according to the present invention.

In this image sensor, a mode signal MODE is provided to a horizontal scanning circuit 15B. The circuit 15B scans from the left side to the right side in FIG. 5 when the mode signal MODE indicates a normal image mode, and scans in the opposite direction when the mode signal MODE indicates a left/right reverse image mode (or a top/bottom and left/right reverse image mode).

The black clamp level for each horizontal line is

averaging line 30A of FIG. 6 and part of peripheral circuitry thereof.

In FIG. 6, the black clamp circuit 18 has an integration circuit for obtaining an average of voltages read out from potential averaging lines 30A to 30C each through a buffer amplifier, a read-out switch and a vertical bus line. The black clamp circuit 18 holds the average as a black clamp level V_b and thereafter outputs the integrated light signal by subtracting the black clamp level V_b from the effective pixels' integrated signal V_s on the horizontal bus 16. Such a black pixel correcting operation is performed every frame and called as frame black clamp.

In the fourth embodiment, a similar effect as that of the first embodiment is obtained.

Fifth Embodiment

FIG. 8 is a schematic block diagram showing an image sensor of a fifth embodiment according to the present invention.

In this image sensor, potential averaging lines 30A to 30C are connected to each other through a common line 30D.

FIG. 9 shows potential averaging lines 30A to 30D of FIG. 8 and part of peripheral circuitry thereof.

The potential averaging lines 30A to 30D also function as the reset potential supply line 40 of FIG. 2. That is,

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the reset switch element 41 commonly used for three pixel rows is connected to the common line 30D. Since an integrated dark current signal in common with the three pixel rows can be read out from each vertical bus line, the row select lines 50A, 50B and 50C for the three pixel rows are also commonly connected to each other through a common line 50D, and a row select signal RS0 is provided to the common line 50D to commonly turn on/off read-out switch elements for the three pixel rows.

Since only the row select signal RS0 is sufficient for the three pixel rows, the number of stages of the vertical scanning circuit 11B is larger than the number of rows in the effective pixel region 102 by one, and the configuration thereof is thus simpler than that of the vertical scanning circuit 11A of FIG. 6.

Further, since the black clamp period in the vertical blanking period can be $1/3$ of that in the case of the fourth embodiment, the fifth embodiment is especially advantageous in a case where the number of pixels of the pixel array 10 is quite large and therefore the vertical blanking period is short.

The other points are the same as that of the fourth embodiment.

Sixth Embodiment

FIG. 11 is a schematic block diagram showing an image sensor of a seventh embodiment according to the present invention.

A reference voltage generating circuit 21a supplies a reset voltage to the pixel array 10 and reference voltages to the sample and hold circuits 14 and the amplifier circuit 17. The reference voltage generating circuit 21a is a constituent of a power source circuit 21.

A mode signal MODE is provided to the power source circuit 21, and the power source circuit 21 supplies power source voltages to circuits at all times when the mode signal indicate a normal mode. The power source circuit 21 supplies the power source voltage to a block BL1 during an enable signal EN1 from a power source control circuit 22 is active and ceases the supply during the signal EN1 is inactive, while supplying the power source voltages to a block BL2 during an enable signal EN2 from the power source control circuit 22 is active and ceases the supply during the signal EN2 is inactive.

The block BL1 includes the pixel array 10 and the vertical scanning circuit 11. The block BL2 includes the sample and hold control circuit 13, the sample and hold circuits 14, the horizontal scanning circuit 15, the amplifier circuit 17 and the A/D converter circuit 19. Although the block BL2 includes the black clamp circuit as well, it is omitted for simplification and this applies in the below other embodiments.

The power source circuit 21 supplies a power source

voltage to the timing control circuit 20 and the power source control circuit 22 at all times even in a low power consumption mode.

Since the reference voltage generating circuit 21a is a constituent of the power source circuit 21, the reference voltage generating circuit 21a supplies the reset voltage to the pixel array 10 when the power source circuit 21 supplies the power source voltage to the block BL1, while the reference voltage generating circuit 21a supplies the reference voltages to the sample and hold circuits 14 and the amplifier circuit 17 when the power source circuit 21 supplies the power source voltage to the block BL2.

In the power source control circuit 22, a vertical sync signal VSYNC from the timing control circuit 20 is provided to the clock input of a counter 23, the lowest bit Q0 of the counter provides the enable signal EN2 and the highest bit Q1 of the counter 23 is provided to an inverter 24 to generate the enable signal EN1. The counter 23 outputs counts 0, 1 and 2 cyclically and the enable signal EN1 is high when the count is 0 or 1, while the enable signal EN2 is high when the count is 1.

FIG. 12 is a time chart showing operation of the power source control circuit 22 of FIG. 11.

Next, description will be given of operation of the image sensor configured as described above in a case of low

In an initial state, assume that the count of the counter 23 is 2. In this state, the power source voltages are supplied to neither of the blocks BL1 and BL2.

In response to the rising edge of the vertical sync signal VSYNC, the count of the counter 23 becomes 0 and the enable signal EN1 goes high and the power source voltage is supplied to the block BL1.

(Reading-out period)

In the block BL1, the pixel lines are sequentially activated and the vertical read out and resetting are performed line by line. In the block BL2, the horizontal read out is performed each time after pixel signals from

selected one row are latched in the sample and hold circuits 14.

That is, operation in the read out period is the same as that in the normal mode.

(Power-off period)

In response to the rising edge of a vertical sync signal VSYNC, the count of the counter 23 becomes 2 and the enable signals EN1 and EN2 go low to cease the supply of the power source voltages to the blocks BL1 and BL2.

The periods of the light integration, the read out and the power-off described above are cyclically repeated.

Consumed currents are, for example, as follows:

about 1 mA into the pixel array 10,

about 3 mA in total to the vertical scanning circuit 11, the sample and hold control circuits 13, the horizontal scanning circuit 15, the timing control circuit 20 and the power source control circuit 22,

about 2.5 mA into the sample and hold circuits 14,

about 8 mA into the amplifier circuit 17,

about 12 mA into the A/D converter circuit 19,

about 0.5 mA into the reference voltage generating circuit 21a, and

about 22.5 mA in total to the sample and hold circuits 14, the amplifier circuit 17 and the A/D converter circuit 19 in the block BL2, wherein this current is comparatively

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large.

According to this seventh embodiment, power supply to the block BL2 ceases in the light integration period and moreover, power supply to the blocks BL1 and BL2 ceases in the power-off period, therefore, in a 10 frame period for example, power consumption of the image sensor can be reduced to about 1/3 of that in the normal mode.

Eighth Embodiment

FIG. 13 is a schematic block diagram showing a image sensor of an eighth embodiment according to the present invention.

A power source circuit 21A supplies its power source voltage to the pixel array 10 at all times even in the low power consumption mode.

In the low power consumption mode, the power source circuit 21A supplies the power source voltage to the vertical scanning circuit 11 during an enable signal EN1A is active, while ceasing the supply during the enable signal EN1A is inactive.

In a power source control circuit 22A, the output bit Q0 of the counter 23 is provided to the inverter 24 to generate the enable signal EN1A and the output bit Q1 of the counter 23 provides an enable signal EN2.

The other constituents are the same as those of FIG.

11.

FIG. 14 is a time chart showing operation of the power source control circuit 22A of FIG. 13.

Next, description will be given of operation of the image sensor configured as describe above in a case of the low power consumption mode.

In an initial state, assume that the count of the counter 23 is 2. In this state, the power source voltages are supplied to the vertical scanning circuit 11 and the block BL2.

(First light integration period)

In response to the rising edge of the vertical sync signal VSYNC, the count of the counter 23 becomes 0, the enable signal EN2 goes low and supply of the power source voltage to the block BL2 ceases.

The vertical scanning circuit 11 performs vertical scanning in response to the control signal from the timing control circuit 20. Thereby, the above described read out and resetting are performed line by line.

(Second light integration period)

In response to the rising edge of the vertical sync signal VSYNC, the count of the counter 23 becomes 1 and the enable signal EN1A goes low and supply of the power source voltage to the vertical scanning circuit 11 ceases.

Thereby, only the light integration is performed in

the pixel array 10.

(Reading-out period)

In response to the rising edge of the vertical sync signal VSYNC, the count of the counter 23 becomes 2, the enable signals EN1 and EN2 go high and the power source voltages are supplied to the blocks BL1 and BL2.

Thereby, the same operation as read out in the seventh embodiment is performed.

The periods of first and second light integration and reading-out described above are cyclically repeated.

According to this eighth embodiment, supply of the power source voltage to the block BL2 is cut off in the first and second light integration periods and the state is close to power-off. Therefore in a 15 frame periods for example, power consumption of the image sensor can be reduced to a value lower than 50 % of that in the normal operation mode. Further, light integration periods are twice as long as in the first embodiment to improve sensitivity of the image sensor.

Note that the second light integration period may be a plurality of frames to increase the length of the light integration period by replacing the counter 23 of the power source control circuit 22A with a scale-of-N counter, where $N > 3$, and changing logic circuit configuration.

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Ninth embodiment

FIG. 15 is a schematic block diagram showing a image sensor of a ninth embodiment according to the present invention.

A power source circuit 21B supplies the power source voltage to the pixel array 10 and the vertical scanning circuit 11 at all times even in the low power consumption mode. Therefore, there is no need to provide the enable signal EN1 to the power source circuit 21B.

In a power source control circuit 22B, the output bits Q0 and Q1 of the counter 23 are provided to an OR gate 25 to generate the enable signal EN2.

The other constituents are the same as that of FIG. 11.

FIG. 16 is a time chart showing operation of the power source control circuit 22B of FIG. 15.

Next, description will be given of operation of the image sensor configured as described above in the case of the low power consumption mode.

In an initial state, assume that the count of the counter 23 is 2. In this state, the power source voltage is supplied to the block BL2.

(Light integration period)

In response to the rising edge of the vertical sync signal VSYNC, the count of the counter 23 becomes 0 and the enable signal EN2 goes low and supply of the power source

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voltage to the block BL2 ceases.

The vertical scanning circuit 11 performs vertical scanning in response to the control signal from the timing control circuit 20. Thereby, the above-described vertical read out and resetting are performed line by line.

(First read out period)

In response to the rising edge of the vertical sync signal VSYNC, the count of the counter 23 becomes 1 and the enable signal EN2 goes high and the power source voltages are supplied to the block BL2.

Thereby, the same operation as the read out in the seventh embodiment is performed.

(Second read out period)

The count of the counter 23 becomes 2 in response to the rising edge of the vertical sync signal VSYNC and the enable signal EN2 remains high.

Thereby, the same operation as the read out described above is performed.

The periods of such light integration, first read out and second read out are cyclically repeated.

According to this ninth embodiment, since supply of the power source voltages to the block BL2 are cut off in the light integration period, the state is close to power-off and power consumption of the image sensor can be reduced to about 2/3 of that in the normal operation mode. Moreover,

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since read out is performed in two of three frames, a frame rate can be increased to twice as large as that in the seventh embodiment.

Tenth Embodiment

FIG. 17 is a schematic block diagram showing an image sensor of a tenth embodiment according to the present invention.

This image sensor is analogous to that of FIG. 11 but differs from the seventh embodiment in that the enable signal EN2 of FIG. 11 is divided into enable signals EN21 to EN23.

In the low power consumption mode, a power source circuit 21C supplies the power source voltages as follows: during the enable signal EN21 is active to the sample and hold control circuit 13, the sample and hold circuits 14 and the horizontal scanning circuit 15, during the enable signal EN22 is active to the amplifier circuit 17, and during the enable signal 23 is active to the A/D converter circuit 19.

In a power control circuit 22C, a logic circuit 26 generates enable signals EN21 to EN23 shown in FIG. 18 according to the output bit Q0 of the counter 23 and timing correction signals from the timing control circuit 20. The rising and falling edges of the enable signals EN21 to EN23 are deviated a little from one another.

Description of operation of the above-described configuration is omitted since it is apparent from the description of the seventh embodiment and FIG. 18.

Although preferred embodiments of the present invention has been described, it is to be understood that the invention is not limited thereto and that various changes and modifications may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.

In the seventh embodiment, the power-off period may be two vertical scanning periods or longer if further reduced frame rate is no problem.

Further, the A/D converter circuit 19 may be not constituent of the image sensor. In stead of the amplifier circuit 17 connected to the horizontal bus 16, amplifier circuits connected to respective vertical bus lines may be employed. The image sensor is not limited to be of a MOS type but may be of such a CCD type.